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Contact between the Peoples Temple and U.S. Government Officials in Guyana and the U.S.

From 1974 until July 1977, Embassy contacts with the Peoples Temple were routine, being confined to the issuance of passports, reports of several births and notarial services. These routine consular contacts were infrequent and only on one occasion did the Chief of Mission meet with Jim Jones. That was in December 1976 when Jones, accompanied by Mervyn Dymally, Lieutenant Governor of California, visited Guyana. Embassy officials first visited the site of Jonestown in 1975.

Embassy officials first became concerned with the Peoples Temple's activities in Guyana in August 1977 when the Department and the Embassy became aware of questionable activities by the Peoples Temple in the United States. Many of these allegations had been investigated and published by New West Magazine.

In late August 1977, the Embassy received its first inquiry concerning the possibility that a specific member of the Peoples Temple was being held against her will in Jonestown. A Consular Officer travelled to Jonestown on August 29 and was informed by the individual,

in a personal private contact that the report was not true and that she wished to remain at the agricultural community.

During this initial visit to the area the officer interviewed a Temple member in the town of Matthews Ridge. This individual had departed Jonestown without hindrance. In his meeting with the Officer the person requested the Officer to arrange his return to the United States at Temple expense. The Temple subsequently agreed and the person left Guyana shortly thereafter.

The Embassy also became concerned over the reported large number of children that had been brought into Guyana by the Temple who purportedly had been wards of various courts in California and who were in the custody of Temple members. The Department queried the State of California, and was informed by the authorities in California that to the best of their knowledge such activity was not against the law provided permission had been obtained to take the children outside the U.S.

At about the same time the Embassy learned of a custody case of a five year old child, John Victor Stoen, whose parents were former members of the Temple.

The child had been left in Guyana in the custody of Jim Jones and another Temple member. The mother, Mrs. Grace Stoen, had filed in the California courts to regain custody of her child, and was granted custody.

In September 1977, a lawyer for Mrs. Stoen travelled to Guyana and instituted an action in Guyanese courts to obtain custody of the child and to return him to the United States. The case was still pending in the Guyanese courts as of the time of the Port Kaituma tragedy.

The Embassy provided appropriate consular assistance to Mrs. Stoen's lawyer during his visit to Guyana. However, the Embassy's role was limited by the regulations defining consular activities.

Beginning in late 1977 Department officials had a number of meetings with former members and relatives of members of the Peoples Temple. During these meetings allegations of mistreatment and brainwashing were made but no concrete evidence was submitted. However, in every case the Embassy was informed so that the Consular Officer could attempt to verify the allegations by talking to the

relative in question in Jonestown.

Embassy officers at this point also began informal consultations with Guyanese police authorities in Georgetown and the North West district to determine whether allegations of mistreatment of American citizens were true. The Guyanese authorities stated that while there were certain elements of the Peoples Temple operations that raised concern, an investigation of the Peoples Temple had not revealed any evidence of unlawful activities.

Following the August 29, 1977 visit, consular and other Department officers made five additional visits to Jonestown in response to letters received from concerned relatives in the United States. In the course of these visits, 75 to 100 residents of Jonestown were interviewed. Of these, about 40 to 50 were interviewed privately in an open field at a distance from any building to insure privacy to the persons being interviewed. During these interviews, none of the persons involved complained of being held against there will or being physically abused. The Consular Officer making these visits was aware of the allegation that individuals were being psychologically intimidated. Although this type of mind control is very difficult to determine,

for one not clinically trained the officer attempted to see signs of nervous or mental strain that would indicate the individual was not being completely truthful. The officer did not notice any such mannerisms in those individuals that were interviewed. During each interview the Officer offered to escort the individual from the camp. In every case the individual refused his offer.

In addition to the visits to Jonestown, the consular officer had numerous meetings at the Embassy with members of the Peoples Temple. During these meetings, the officer listened to allegations by the Temple of the alleged "conspiracy" against it. He maintained an open, friendly attitude consistent with his position as a representative of the American Government and people. He hoped by so doing to encourage Peoples Temple members to confide in him and provide specific information which would throw light over the alleged maltreatment of American citizens in Jonestown.

In May 1978, Mrs. Debra Blakely, a member of the Temple organization in Georgetown appeared at the Embassy and asked for assistance in departing the country. She stated that she feared that the

Temple would prevent her departure if it learned of her intentions. The Embassy provided all appropriate aid including an emergency passport to replace the one held by the Temple. Mrs. Blakely departed Guyana the next day escorted by a consular officer who happened to be traveling on the same flight.

In late May, the Embassy provided assistance to an American newspaper reporter from Ukiah, California, Mrs. Catherine Hunter, who claimed to have been harrassed by the Peoples Temple while visiting Guyana to write a newspaper article on the Temples activities. The Embassy facilitated her departure from Guyana shortly after being called into the case.

It should be noted that although the Peoples Temple was involved in Mrs. Hunter's case, no direct evidence was ever obtained of anything other than verbal harrassment.

From early 1978 through September the Department and the Embassy received an increasingly large number of letters, pro and con, referring to the Peoples Temple activities in Jonestown. The vast majority of the letters were favorable to the Peoples Temple but reflected an obvious organized letter writing campaign. These letters were not answered. Those letters registering

complaints against the Temple which made specific requests for information about relatives in Jonestown were answered, and efforts made through the Embassy to respond to the requests.

On May 21, 1978 a letter from a spokesman of of a group known as "The Concerned Relatives" who are opposed to the Peoples Temple, was received by the Department. The letter requested the Department to transmit an attached memorandum to the Prime Minister of Guyana. The attachment outlined various allegations against the Peoples Temple activities in Jonestown and asked the GOG's assistance in stopping Jim Jones from violating the human rights of the residents of Jonestown. In addition, the letter requested the Department to initiate a continuing investigation of the Peoples Temple in Guyana by stationing U.S. Embassy personnel on the premises around the clock so as to protect the legal rights of U.S. cititzens in Jonestown. This letter was not answered. Under international law the Embassy has no authority to station U.S. personnel on private property in a foreign country nor can it carry out investigations of American citizens. The authority and jurisdiction to do so

is vested in the local authorities. The memorandum, which had also been received by the Guyanese authorities was discussed informally by the Embassy with appropriate Guyanese law inforcement officials.

In June 1978, in view of the increasing number of reports (including rumors of a mass suicide pact among Temple members) the Embassy consulted the Department over its role in connection with the Peoples Temple activities in Jonestown and the welfare of the American citizen members residing there. The Embassy also asked for clarification about the responsibility and jurisdiction of the Government of Guyana with particular reference to its responsibility to afford protection to U.S. citizens in Jonestown if required by the circumstances.

The Department's response was that, although the situation was unique, it would be inappropriate for the Embassy to make a formal representation to the GOG unless the U.S. government could provide specific, substantiated information concerning illegal activities on the part of the Temple. However, it would be incumbent upon the GOG to provide protection and assistance to threatened U.S. citizens if there was evidence of such a need.

It should be emphasized that up to this point neither the Embassy nor the Department of State had clear, independent, and substantiated evidence of illegal activities. It is also important to note that those opposed to the organization did not report that acts of violence had been committed against them while they were in Guyana. Their main complaints involved verbal harrassment from Peoples Temple members. Thus, the Embassy had no grounds to request officially the Government of Guyana to investigate the organization's activities in Jonestown and Georgetown.

Finally, although there were investigations being carried out by other U.S. government agencies, there was never any report (known to the Department of State) that conclusive evidence of illegal activities by the Peoples Temple had been uncovered nor were there any criminal charges or indictments brought against the organization.